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ABSTRACT

Today, being literate entails more than reading, writing, and spelling correctly. Literacy also includes the following: a process that is a creative set of social practices that vary according to context, text, and purpose; a process that integrates language skills with thinking; and a political process that empowers people and is inextricably linked with the ways people lead their lives. Although it is commonly assumed that most Australian adults from an English-speaking background have the literacy skills needed to function effectively within Australian society, approximately 19% of Australians have very poor literacy skills and 27% have at least some difficulty with literacy tasks. Adult literacy programs in Australia are delivered by a number of providers, including the following: community providers (neighborhood houses, community centers, libraries); technical and further education colleges; the Council of Adult Education; registered private practitioners, and workplace training programs. National studies of adult literacy in Australia in 1990 and 1996 and studies of literacy needs in a changing workplace have documented the many positive outcomes of language and literacy training within Australian workplaces and the fact that poor English language and literacy skills are preventing many Australian workers from benefiting from training programs. (11 references) (MN)

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Adult Literacy:
Some Information

ARIS Information Sheet

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Adult literacy: some information

What is literacy?

In the past, people were defined as literate or illiterate simply on the premise of whether they could or couldn't sign their own name. These days, such definitions are outmoded because it is understood that people use their literacy skills in a variety of contexts.

Being literate entails more than reading, writing and spelling correctly, it is better understood as a **process** which:

- is a creative set of social practices, variable according to context, text and purpose
- has meaning
- integrates language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) with thinking
- is a political process which empowers people
- is inextricably linked to the ways people live their lives.

People need literacy skills to read and write for a range of purposes. They need these skills to develop knowledge and understanding, to achieve personal growth and to function effectively in our contemporary society.

Early policy definitions of literacy included within it the recognition of numbers and basic mathematical signs and symbols within text - this was called **numeracy**. In practice however, people need to understand and use mathematical and numeracy skills in a range of contexts, in a similar way to their reading and writing skills. Simple recognition of signs and symbols has given way to a broader definition of numeracy that includes using an understanding of maths as a tool to make sense of the world.

It is commonly **assumed** that most adults, particularly those from an English speaking background, have the literacy skills that enable them to function effectively within Australian society. For those who do not have the skills, life can become a complex web of hiding their low skill levels to avoid both real and perceived ridicule, threat of humiliation and/or job loss.

Reasons for literacy problems

There are innumerable reasons why some adults leave school without the skills that enable them to lead literate lives, some common themes and reasons why, are:

- disrupted schooling (illness or constant moving)
- social and emotional difficulties in childhood, (family breakdown, or other trauma)
- physical problems (untreated visual impairment)
- inadequate schooling, (being required to find paid work or look after family members)
- negative school experiences, (ridicule, bullying, corporal punishment)
- specific learning difficulties (dyslexia)
- English as a second language, (being discouraged from maintaining first language).

Who provides adult literacy programs?

Adult literacy programs within Australia are delivered by a range of providers, in a number of settings such as:

- Community providers - neighbourhood houses, community centres, and some libraries
- TAFE colleges
- The Council of Adult Education, (CAE - Victoria)
- Registered Private providers
- Workplace training programs.

Literacy surveys

No Single Measure

1990 was International Literacy Year. The Department of Employment, Education & Training funded a survey to determine what proportion of the adult Australian population was able to perform a range of literacy tasks with varying degrees of difficulty. This survey was the first national survey of adult literacy in English in Australia. The survey and report was entitled *No Single Measure* (1989). The results of this survey influenced government decision making in terms education and training. Government policy linked literacy standards to employment training, in the drive to make the Australian workforce internationally competitive.

ARIS Information sheets are produced by ARIS, the Adult Education Resource and Information Service, Language Australia.

A full listing of resources and journal articles on Adult Literacy can be obtained by contacting ARIS.

All resources and readings listed are held by ARIS and are recorded on our databases. ARIS databases can be accessed on-line through the ARIS homepage:
http://sunsite.anu.edu.au/language-australia/aris

General findings

- 1% of the sample had such low levels of literacy that they were not asked to continue with the assessment.
- A majority of Australians could perform simple literacy tasks but many were not able to cope with more complex tasks.
- 10% of the sample failed to achieve at all on the quantitative literacy.
- Adults from non-English speaking countries performed less well than English speaking born on all aspects of the survey the differences were less than expected.
- Adults who cite personal or family health problems, socio-economic problems such as poverty, or a negative attitude to school performed worse than average on all literacy dimensions.
- Workplace education was identified as a potential way to reach adults in need of training on a regular basis.
- The best predictor of current literacy performance was their current level of literacy activity. Eleven percent of the sample had not looked at a book in the preceding six months.

Aspects of literacy

In 1996, the Australian Bureau of Statistics undertook a survey of over 13,000 Australians aged 15 - 74. 87% responded.

In conducting this survey, Australia became part of the International Adult Literacy Survey coordinated by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and Statistics Canada. Similar surveys have been conducted in many countries around the world over a four year period. This will enable the International Adult Literacy Survey to compare a variety of measurable aspects of literacy.

"The present survey is by far the largest and most detailed examination of the distribution and characteristics of adult literacy and numeracy." (Lo Bianco, 1997)

The survey was designed to measure aspects of literacy and numeracy skills to:

- identify 'at risk' groups with low level skills
- assist in the evaluation of literacy/numeracy programs
- identify barriers to literacy/numeracy skill development
- provide statistical support for planning and decision making.

There were two components to the survey, the first part included interviews to obtain socio-demographic information, and for respondents to rate their own skills, the second part of the survey involved respondents undertaking a number of literacy/numeracy tasks.

The tasks assessed three types of literacy skills:

Prose literacy: the ability to read and understand information from prose texts; eg. newspapers, brochures, magazines etc.

Document literacy: the ability to locate and use information in texts such as; tables, schedules, charts, graphs and maps etc.

Quantitative literacy: the ability to use mathematical operations to solve problems contained in printed texts and documents.

The results of the survey were published in two volumes, ***Aspects of Literacy: Profiles and Perceptions, Australia 1996 (1996)*** and ***Aspects of Literacy: Assessed Skilled Levels, Australia 1996 (1997)***.

Task difficulty was organised into 5 Levels for analysis.

Level 1: Poor skills, at this level people would experience ***considerable difficulty*** in using many of the printed materials encountered daily.

Level 2: At this level, people would experience ***some difficulty***.

Level 3: This level represents the ability to ***cope*** with a varied range of material in daily life and work.

Level 4: ***Good*** literacy skills, respondents at this level use higher order skills, matching, integration of information, inferences, etc.

Level 5: ***Very good*** literacy skills: respondents could make high level inferences, use complex and process conditional information and calculate sequential multiple operations.

Regarding skill level distribution

Result for each of the literacy types *(prose, document, quantitative)*, were similar.

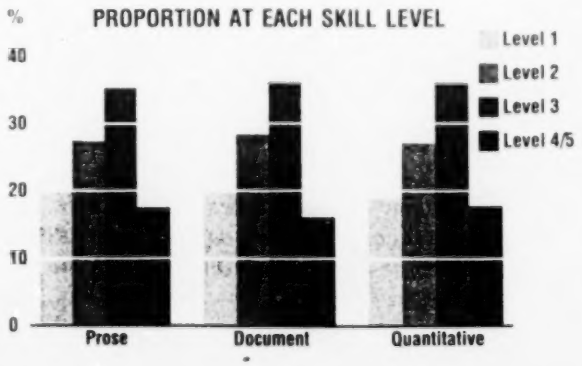
19% of Australians have very poor skills (level 1).

27% are deemed at level 2, having some difficulty with literacy tasks.

35.3% are skilled enough to cope with daily literacy requirements, (level 3).

15% have good literacy skills, (level 4).

2% have very good skills, (level 5).



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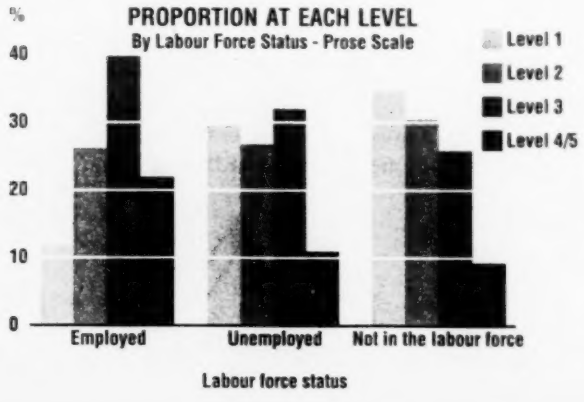
General findings

- The self perceptions of those with very poor skills correlated with performance, these perceptions are borne out in the cited reasons for leaving school (negative feelings)
- Women generally rate their performance in literacy tasks higher and performance in numeracy tasks lower than men. Men rate their performance in literacy tasks lower and performance in numeracy tasks higher than women
- There are lower levels of literacy in rural areas, the proportion of people working at levels 1 and 2 is higher outside capital cities. In some states the difference between urban and rural areas is marked.
- Younger people tend to have higher levels of literacy than older people. The proportion of people at levels 1 and 2 increase with age.
- People with higher levels of literacy, generally read more widely and more often than those at lower skill levels.
- The greater the level of educational attainment, generally, the higher the level of literacy, there are also links between an individual's level of skill and their parents educational level.
- Survey participants from a non - English speaking background (NESB) performed less well than those from an English speaking background. Of NESB people between 43 - 48% are at level 1 compared to 14% of English speaking background participants.
- People with higher rates of literacy have greater rates of participation in social activities .
- There is a clear relationship between literacy skill level and employment status, 11 - 12% of employed people are at level 1. Much larger proportions of employed people are at levels 3 - 5.
- Literacy and numeracy skills are inextricably linked to labour market outcomes. Employment rates decline with lower literacy/numeracy. The rate of decline is greater for women than men, and for those whose first language is other than English.



The Australian labour market

"A successful economy needs the solid base of a literate and numerate workforce to be able to respond quickly and confidently to increasingly changing workplace demands." (Wickert & Kevin, 1995)

Australian workplaces have had to implement a range of dramatic changes over the past 15 years, in order to remain competitive in terms of producing high quality goods at comparable prices within the international marketplace.

The 'shopfloor' has been the focal point for much of these changes, where workers are called on to work **'smarter not harder'.**

"Preparing the new workforce to meet the new market demands has involved the implementation of a whole range of measures, from restructuring to multiskilling, to the introduction of workteams and new technology. Those with the necessary skills to meet all the challenges are few. And for each worker unable to participate fully in the new workplace, less productivity, efficiency and safety will result." (DEETYA. 1996:2)

The changing workplace

Many aspects of work and workplaces have changed:

- workplaces are being restructured and work processes reorganised
- technology is changing and training is necessary to develop new skills to use technology
- supervisors need to help workers plan and organise, and often need to train other workers
- managers and workers need to work together and communicate with each other
- award restructuring has changed work and workers can train to increase their skills and therefore be classified at a higher level.

These changes have led to an increase of written communication in the workplace. Workers need to:

- read, write, understand spoken and written language
- take part in discussions and meetings
- work in teams
- solve problems, use maths to calculate problems, and understand graphs
- undertake training.

Inadequate literacy in the workplace is a problem for native English speakers as well as people of non - English speaking background.

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Many workers cannot benefit from training programs. Poor English language or literacy skills may cause workers to drop out of, or refuse to enter training programs. Therefore all workers should be given access to literacy and numeracy support if necessary, and where possible, literacy, language and numeracy components need to be integrated into training and re-training programs.

Training programs for the workplace

The need to implement effective methods of communication encompasses all levels of management and workers in a workplace. **Workplace communication strategies** developed in a variety of ways, across the different levels of management, supervisors and workers, and in terms of written and oral communications are vital.

Plain English approaches to written communication need to be developed throughout organisations.

Positive outcomes

Language and literacy training within Australian workplaces continues to generate positive outcomes for those sites and their workers

- improved language and literacy skills
- potential and real direct cost savings
- more effective and efficient work practices
- better understanding of the systems of the workplace, its work practices and its policies
- increased awareness of Occupational Health and Safety procedures, hence lower accident rates.
- improved worker flexibility and multi skilling, hence more ability to take advantage of promotions and award restructuring
- a more critical thinking workforce.

These benefits result in improved morale, conditions and productivity.

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How to access these resources

ARIS, Language Australia houses a specialist collection of resources and journal articles on adult literacy, language and numeracy. All resources and readings listed in this bibliography are held in the ARIS collection.

You can access the resources by visiting ARIS, Language Australia at:

Level 9,
300 Flinders Street,
Melbourne 3000.
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